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AUTHOR Dimock, Edward C., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Indian literature is intimately bound up with the Indian religious system. The earliest sacred writings are the Vedas. In addition to being poetry on nature, and later on, ritual formulae for controlling the universe, the Vedas have philosophical speculation. A large part of classical Indian literature consists of writing commentaries on commentaries. Basically, all thought and all literature can only be a commentary on the four Vedas, said to exist from the beginning of creation. Indian literature is so rooted in religion that if some Indian literature does not start out being religious, it often ends up being so. The whole course of Indian literature and of Indian civilization was transformed by the bhakti movement; devotional worship of a personal deity. Also influencing Indian literature were the Islamic tradition, and the Dravidian culture. The French, British, Dutch, Portuguese, and English also influenced the dominant Sanskrit tradition. Not all modern Indian writers write in English nor is the West discernible in every work of literature produced today. The current situation is one where exciting creative literature is being written both in English and in the regional languages. (Author/AM)

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LITERATURE OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

By Edward C. Dimock, Jr.

Until relatively modern times in India -- meaning by India the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent -- it is sometimes hard to distinguish literature from the documents of religion. This is not because of the imposition of a system of religious values on the society; rather, it is because religion in India is so interwoven with every other facet of life, including many forms of literature, that it becomes indistinguishable.

At the time when the earliest sacred writings, the Vedas, were composed, a period usually assumed to be a few centuries this way or that from 1500 B.C., they were without question folk expression of religious wonderings. These express the perceptions and the fears of a nomadic people in a hostile universe, dependent upon the rain, the sun, all the forces of nature and of the gods, angry or benevolent, who control. The Vedas -- especially the Rig Veda, the oldest and greatest of the four books -- are poems of frequently great literary power, and, as we shall see, of religious power. They embody the simple awe that a wandering people feels of the storm, the temporal and eternal night, of the welcome dawn, of the winds and the miracle of human speech. And as time passed, and the Aryan tribes, as they are called, moved slowly down through Central Asia, through the Khyber Pass and into the Gangetic Plain, the racial memory of the mountains and the storms remained, fortified and encapsulated by the Vedic hymns. And memory being what it is, these hymns, formulated in eternity, became not the outcries of ancestors, but the speech of the gods themselves.

This history through literature is the most ideal kind of history. For also in the course of time, as people settled down to a surer existence, they began to see that man, also possessing the miracle of speech, the word, might do more than merely propitiate the hostile gods by sacrifice. Their forefathers existed successfully because of the Vedas. And therefore one can control the universe by the use of these same words. And the Vedas, no longer folk poetry became ritual formulae.

It seems that, in India, the truth is there from the beginning. Some men, as the ideal yogin or seer sitting on his mountain top, know it all, blissfully and absolutely. Others, less fortunate, uncover only a corner of it here and there. Thus, except for the successful yogin, who cannot or does not communicate his knowledge, one man's insight can only supplement, not replace, that of another. All thought and all literature can only be commentary on the four Vedas, there from the beginning. The formulae for controlling the universe, for keeping man and the gods in equilibrium -- the later sacred books called Brahmanas -- were conceived and elaborated

as expansions of the four kernels of truth, the Vedas.

The Vedas are not only poetry on nature and, later on, ritual formulae. As the Vedic poets gazed into the vast night, they speculated on man's relation to it all, to the creation, to birth and death, to animals and other men. And especially the tenth book, the latest of the Rig Veda, provided the grounds for philosophical speculation. This speculation is embodied in the Aranyakas, the "forest books" evolved from meditation, and in the Upanishads. And these, of course in four sets, provided the basis for the later commentaries, called the Nyaya, Vaisesika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purvamimamsa, and, best known of all, the Vedanta systems of philosophy, the last popular in the West. Even in recently evolved systems, the argument is that "the Vedanta (or whatever) system is fine as far as it goes; but the real meaning of the Veda is..." The process of uncovering bits and parts of truth goes on.

This notion of writing commentaries on commentaries is at the root of a large part of classical Indian literature. In the texts called sastras, law-books on every conceivable facet of life from caste regulation to sexual pleasure, the basic statement is usually given in a pithy, aphoristic form. The commentaries elaborate upon this. So too with later literature. It is impossible to date accurately the great classical epic Mahabharata, a massive compendium of folktale, myth, belief, and doctrine hung on the framework of a titanic war, after the fashion of other Indo-European epics. (Embedded in the epic is the most sacred book of the Hindus, the Bhagavid-gita.) The Mahabharata is really an encyclopedia of things Indian as they existed before being precipitated out in the epic possibly around the second century B.C., and to a certain extent it defines things as they exist today; for like all epics, the Mahabharata and the more unified Ramayana state what the culture thinks of itself. Thus the great classical poet and playwright Kalidasa can choose an episode from the Mahabharata, commenting on it from his own point of view and, given his genius, there emerges the drama Shakuntala. And thus a modern conscious and the unconscious of his audience, can choose an episode from the epic, as Archibald Macleish can comment on the Book of Job in his play "JB".

At the beginning of this essay, I remarked that Indian literature is intimately bound up with things religious, and that in fact religion pervades all spheres of life. To that statement it should be added that if some Indian literature does not start out being religious, it often ends up being so. The classical drama is an exception, but the Ramayana is a case in point. This epic was written by a man called Valmiki sometime just before or just after the beginning of the Christian era, and like the Mahabharata, the story is of a war between the forces of good, personified by the hero Rama and his allied the monkeys, and those of evil, represented by Ravena, who has abducted Sita, Rama's wife, and his cohorts. It is a morality tale, and in the beautiful version of Valmiki, it is more than that. But in the course of time and as it spread over the

subcontinent, the Ramayana takes on different characteristics. Many later writers, especially in the middle period (12th - 18th centuries), chose to comment on or give their own versions of the theme. But by that time a great religious force, that of bhakti (devotional worship of a personal deity) had swept across northern India, as it had done earlier in the south. And Rama, to these later poets, was an incarnation of the great god Visnu; he is no longer a hero "with arms as hard as iron bars" to draw the bow of war. He is a gentle god, come to save mankind; Ravana's hosts are saved by being killed by him, and the war has therefore become a mere formality. The temper of the whole epic is radically changed.

The Ramayana was not the only thing altered by the bhakti movement. The whole course of Indian literature and, indeed, of Indian civilization, was transformed by it. For the representatives of bhakti were singers and poets; their object was to inspire the people, who were by this time removed from the great classical Sanskrit religious tradition by the rigid and austere system of Brahmanism. These poets sang in the many other languages spoken in India -- Tamil, Bengali, Hindi, and the rest -- and not often in Sanskrit. In so doing they raised these languages to the status which they enjoy today -- vehicles for serious and creative literature. This type of lyric expression of devotion was not unfamiliar to Sanskrit. The Sanskrit poets Bhartrihari, Mayura, and Bana wrote such poetry, and perhaps the highest expression of it was the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva (late 12th century). But the genius of Sanskrit poetry was different, and the highest aim was to create a perfect, highly polished gem to present as an offering to the deity. The poetry of the regional languages was more fervid, more direct, less sophisticated; and the course of Indian literature was changed.

From the 10th century on, too, another element was entering the stream of Indian literature: when the Muslims invaded the subcontinent they brought with them not only their religion but the Perso-Arabic literary tradition reflected principally in Urdu literature by such writers as Ghalib. The Persian elements especially flourished in their new environment. The Sufi tradition was in many ways like that of bhakti, and the imagery of the two poetries is strikingly similar: God as the Beloved (or, in the case of bhakti poetry, the Lover), eternally and deliberately separated from man, to make man's longing greater. In literature and in society, there was interaction at many levels. On other levels, it must be observed, such interaction did not take place; when Islam came to India it was already well established as a religion, and although its literary forms flourished in Indian soil, they were often preserved pure.

Thus, there were three distinct ways in which the Islamic tradition entered the stream of Indian literature. Traditional Islamic themes, often based on Quranic stories, were retold in the regional languages, often deriving color from their new environments. The blending of classical Sufi poetry with that of the Hindu bhaktas (devotees) gave a poetic medium to syncretistic religious movements

such as that of Kabir in Hindi and the Bauls of Bengal. And forms like the ghazal, whether written in Persian or in Urdu, remained essentially unchanged. The Islamic literary tradition of India is thus at the same time a part of the larger Indian one, an integral part of the larger tradition of Islam, and by virtue of language and environment, a new contribution to both.

It is in fact a characteristic of Indian literatures that there is both synecretism and discreteness, depending on the level of examination. A case in point is that of the Dravidian literatures, of which the most noteworthy is Tamil. The Dravidian languages, spoken primarily in the southern part of the subcontinent, are of an entirely different laguage family from Sanskrit and its derivatives, and the literature written in them is almost equally old. The Cankam poetry of Tamil is collected in anthologies which date from the early centuries of the Christian era and is of quite a different genius from Sanskrit: it is less explicit, and draws upon a set of conventions unfamiliar to Sanskrit literature. At the same time, literature written by Indians is Indian, no matter what the language or what the audience: and the Dravidian writings are therefore not totally foreign to the rest of India. Furthermore, the Dravidians adopted literary and religious facets of the Sanskritic culture also, putting their own stamp upon them. The Kumban Ramayana, written in Tamil, is as familiar and dear to people in the south as Valmiki and later versions are in the north, and the values all versions espress are essentially the same.

The fact is that it is often unclear as to which tradition borrowed what from whom. For another fact of Indian history is that there is a constant dynamic exchange going on, between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, and between what anthropologists have called the "great" and the "little" traditions. The Vedic literature was oral literature, remarkably preserved through many centuries by precise learning and repetition. So too were the stories embodied in the Mahabharata and the Puranas, other compedia of religious lore, until relatively recently written down. But the history of all this is obscure. It seems that the dynamic exchange works in both directions: the myths and legends of a local diety in, let us say, Bengal, become famous throughout the region, and are then taken up into the great tradition, associated with an already existing deity, and disseminated through the subcontinent; and, in their turn, the rites and characteristics of that already existing diety become attributed to the local god. So too with literature: a local legend is taken up into the great tradition and disseminated throughout the subcontinent, through Tamil or Sanskrit. There remain, of course, much which is not so taken up, and there is a vast body of literature, still largely unknown in the West, in the regional languages -- folk songs and folktales, legends, aphoristic poetry, even epics. Scholars are only now beginning to work on these unknowns.

As Islam and the Dravidian culture were both absorbed and not absorbed into the dominant Sanskrit tradition, so too with Western civilization. The French, British, Dutch, and Portuguese

were all at one time or another significant forces in India. But the vestiges of all but the British are a few borrowed words in regional languages, and the vanishing ruins of a factory or two. The British, who also began as traders, soon established not only great commerical centers, but the educational system which has had a profound effect on modern India.

Both for trade and for education, English became the linguistic medium, and that language and the literary values it embodies are today vital forces and matters of controversy. Scholars are still busy tracing the influence of Scott, Dickens, and Milton on 19th century writers in the regional languages, and the likes of Eliot in more modern times. And argument about the use of English as a medium of instruction waxes hot. But it is a proposition at least worth considering that a culture accepts only those influences towards which it is predisposed; and the question of what there is in Indian culture, which such a seemingly different esthetic stance from that of the West, that allows it to accept certain literary values, or certain authors, has yet to be examined.

Of course, not all modern Indian writers write in English, nor is the West discernible in every work of literature produced today. In the first place, most writers feel that they can write creatively only in Bengali or Tamil or Marathi or whatever their language, even though they might be bilingual in that language and English. Such writers as these are only now becoming known to audiences other than speakers of their own languages, through programs such as that of the Sahitya Akademi, the national academy of letters in New Delhi. Such programs encourage translations from one Indian language to another, and into English. Excellent new translations include Gordon Roadarmel's translation of Premchands novel Gift of a Cow, T.W. Clark and T.P. Mukherji's translation of Bibhutibhushan Banerji's Pather Panchali, Krishna Baldev Vaid's translation of his own Steps in Darkness, and A.K. Ramanujan's The Interior Landscape. Others feel that English is as native to them as any other language, and some express themselves in a distinctive Indian sytle of English. Good examples of their kind are G.V. Desani's All About H. Hatterr and Raja Rao's The Cat and Shakespeare.

The result is that much exciting creative literature is being written both in English and in the regional languages. In the second place, aesthetic with one another, and there is little that can be called purely Western, or purely within the Indian tradition as a classicist might define it.

In Bengali, the last great exponent of the old was perhaps Rabindranath Tagore, who delighted in sonority of languages and the beauty of nature, and for whom, perhaps, the unit, human or natural, was less important than its place in time and space. And, overlapping in time but far apart in inspiration, Jibananada Das was the beginning of the new. Abrupt and original in imagery, introspective, personal sometimes to the point of obscurity, less

concerned with tradition than with the universals to be deduced from the workings of his own mind and emotions, Jibananada's poetry set the tone for much of the Bengali writing of today. The mixture of East and West is creative and has produced great literature, which largely awaits world recognition through more translation into better known languages.

The dynamic process, then, which has characterized India for so many centuries, goes on, becoming more complex every day. What the ultimate synthesis will be, or whether there will be an ultimate synthesis, is unknown. One things is clear: the most enjoyable means to the understanding of another culture is through the literature which respresents that culture.

All books listed are paperbacks unless otherwise noted.

LITERATURE OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Reference Books:

*The Literatures of India. Edward C. Dimock, Jr. The University of Chicago Press $12.50 Hardback.

The Wonder That Was India. A.L. Basham. Grove $4.95.

Sources of Indian Tradition. Wm. Theodore deBary et al. Columbia. Vol. I $4.00 Vol. II $2.80.

Note:

InterCulture Associates (Box 277, Thompson, Conn. 06277) distributes inexpensive books from India to schools. Also available are study kits, filmstrips and other materials for high school and elementary school. Catalogs are available upon request.

Anthologies

Anthology of Indian Literature. John B. Alphonso-Karkala. Penguin $2.95. Not great, but the only general anthology available. Covers the Vedas to Tagore. (Out-of-print, but only "anthology")

Tales of Ancient India. J.A.B. van Buitenen. Chicago $1.95. 14 tales from the Sanskrit.

The Dance of Shiva and Other Tales from India. Oroon Ghosh. New American Library. (Out-of-print)

Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists. Ananda Coomeraswamy and Sister Nevedeta. Dover $3.00. Retellings of the Ramayana story, the Mahabharata, the Krishna story, Buddha tales, and other stories.

Phantasies of a Love-Thief. Barbara Stoler Miller. Columbia University Press $12.50 Hardback.

*Contemporary Indian Short Stories. Vol, I $2.25. Vol II $2.25. Available from InterCulture Associates. Selection of short stories of the 20th century made by the National Literary Academy of India.

Translations of Titles and Authors Mentioned in Essay by Edward Dimock:

Vedas	Hindu Scriptures. R.C. Zaehner, ed. and tr. Dutton $3.35 Cloth.
Brahmanas	
Upanishads	Excerpts in Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I.
Bhagavad-gita	

The Bhagavad Gita. Franklin Edgerton, tr. Harper $1.95.

The Ramayana. A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic. R.K. Narayan, Viking $7.50 Cloth.

Mahabharata. Chakravarty Rajagopalacharya, $1.25, available from InterCulture Associates.

Bhartrihari: Poems. Barbara Stoler Miller, tr. Columbia $2.25.

Gitagovinda of Jayadeva: Song of Love, George Keyt, tr. 80¢ Available from InterCulture Associates.

Ghalib: The Ghazals of Ghalib. Aijaz Ahmad, ed. Columbia $3.95.

Kabir: No translations of Kabir's work seem to be available.

Bauls of Bengal: Songs of the Bards of Bengal. Deben Bhattacharya, tr. Grove $1.95.

*The Gift of a Cow. Gordon C. Roadarmel, tr. Indiana $2.50.

Pather Panchali: Song of the Road. T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji, tr. Indiana $6.95 Cloth, also available in paperback.

Steps in Darkness. Krishna Baldev Vaid. Grossman $3.50 Cloth.

All About H. Hatterer. G.V. Desani. Lancer $1.25.

The Cat and Shakespeare. Raja Rao. MacMillan $3.95 Cloth.

Tagore: *A Tagore Reader. Amiya Chakravarty, ed. Beacon $2.45.

Other Books not mentioned in Dimock's essay:

The Panchatantra. Arthur W. Ryder, tr. Chicago $3.45. Famous collection of Indian animal fables (influenced Aesop's fables).

*In Praise of Krishna. Songs from the Bengali. Edward C. Dimock and Denise Levertow, trs. Doubleday $1. 25.

Speaking of Siva. A.K. Ramanujan, tr. Penguin $1.25. Vacanas or free-verse lyrics written by four major saints of the great bhakti protest movment which originated in the 10th century.

Modern Prose:

*R.K. Narayan: The Financial Expert. Farrar Straus and Giroux $1.95. Highly entertaining.
Vendor of Sweets. Avon $1.45
An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories. $1.00 Available from InterCulture Associates

Chemeen. Thakazhi Pillai. Tr. from the Malayalam by Narayana Menon. Tragic love story of Hindu girl and Muslim boy. Available from InterCulture Associates. 80¢

The World of Premchand. Short stories by Premchand. Indiana $6.50 Cloth.

Train to Pakistan. Also under the title of Mano Majna. Hindu and Muslims in a town during the period of the British withdrawl and the separation of Pakistan from India.

*If time and budget are limited, these books or authors are most highly recommended.